

LOCAL BIOGRAPHY.

ROBERT LOWES.

EDWARD COULSON.

COMPILED FROM THE ORAL TESTIMONY OF CONTEMPORARIES AND OTHER
AUTHENTIC SOURCES.

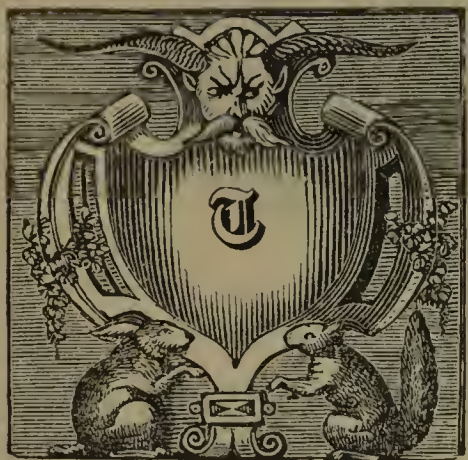
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MDCCCXLIII.



ROBERT LOWES,

Attorney at Law, late of Hexham.



HE practice of the Law is at best an unfavourable soil for the culture of Christian virtues. It is the opinion of some good men that the profession is incompatible with true religion,—an opinion which merits grave consideration. Conveyancing however, is to be distinguished from Litigation; the former by no means implying that destitution of right principle

which is inseparable from an advocate, who as readily defends the culprit whom he knows to be guilty, as the party who suffers oppression. Gain, from whatever quarter, being his object, irrespective of justice, and regardless of the interests of truth,—his fee being secured, he readily undertakes

“To make the worse appear the better reason.”

The history of Bobby Lowes the Lawyer, as he is commonly called, affords an instructive lesson to posterity; exhibiting as it does, a course of apparently successful knavery, terminating in utter indigence, absolute beggary and merited opprobrium. He was a Lawyer of considerable practice, having wealthy and extensive connexions; displayed much confidence and skill as a pleader in court, but attained his principal notoriety as a Conveyancer. His *Chef d'oeuvre* was the getting possession of the title-deeds of many lots of property, some of which were mortgaged to him, and others were detained, which came to his hands in the ordinary way of business. Many of these documents he is believed to have destroyed. Some of the premises were held for a length of time after his death, by those who happened to be the occupiers, without payment of rent: or if they came to be sold, were knocked down at an underworth in consideration of the insufficiency of the titles; and are still recognized by the older inhabitants of Hexham, as *Bobby Lowes' property*.

ROBERT LOWES lived in the great house opposite to the abbey-gate, many years subsequently occupied by the Messrs. Stokoe, Surgeons; but which since the year 1839, has been appropriated by the Wesley-



ABBEY-GATE, HEXHAM.

an Methodists, who have greatly enlarged it, as a Chapel and Preacher's house. He had his country residence at Humshaugh, in the demesne afterwards occupied by the Richmond family. It is related of him that on one occasion whilst he sat solitarily in his house at Hexham; probably at an untimely hour, and perhaps whilst indulging those speculations which are peculiar to men who have made up their minds to let nothing stand between them and their wishes,—a sweep descended the chimney and stood in his presence, to the great consternation of the Lawyer, whose apprehensions were not much allayed by his black visitant informing him that his *Master* would be with him soon! Among several men-servants whom he kept about him, Tom Wilson of the Jobler's style seems to have had most influence with his master. Once after Lowes' failure, whilst the Lawyer and his man were overhauling a quantity of parchments which it was thought prudent to dispose of; whilst some were preserved and others committed to the flames, a document turned up which it was Wilson's interest as a tenant to put out of the way, 'Burn it,' said Tom, and the Lawyer not much troubled with scrupulosity, who had kept his carriage, but 'could not afford to keep a conscience,'—at once freed his man from his responsibility to his landlord.

What it was that gave a turn to his affairs, what events accelerated his ruin, cannot here be distinctly traced; but he did at length come to utter indigence, and continued so till his end, when he literally died in a ditch. He seems latterly to have gone almost mad, and ran about the country with a batch of papers on his back; living in great poverty, and lodging, when in the town, with one Frank Armstrong. He seems to have survived his failure long, and died an

old man. He was somewhat small in person, and peculiar in manner and dress; in the latter period of his life he was ragged and dirty, though he was bred a gentleman, and had kept his coach. He constantly wore a red night-cap under his hat, which with a bag over his shoulder gave him an air of singularity, which his unique manner rendered more remarkable. On one of his excursions into Hexhamshire, he called at a gentleman's house at a late hour in the evening. His company was undesireable, but a recollection of his former rank in society, procured for him a nights' quarters, and a servant was ordered to provide him a lodging. The Lawyer however seemed disposed to spend the night in study, spread the contents of his green bag on the table, unrolled his briefs, and began transacting business in his own way; muttering his threatenings in the hearing of the servant, he forbad her interference on pain of imprisonment. Matters went on thus till three o'clock in the morning, when the woman being anxious for rest swept the Lawyers papers into the fire, and calling a manservant, turned him out of the house, raving at the loss of his documents, and indignant at the outrage on his person.

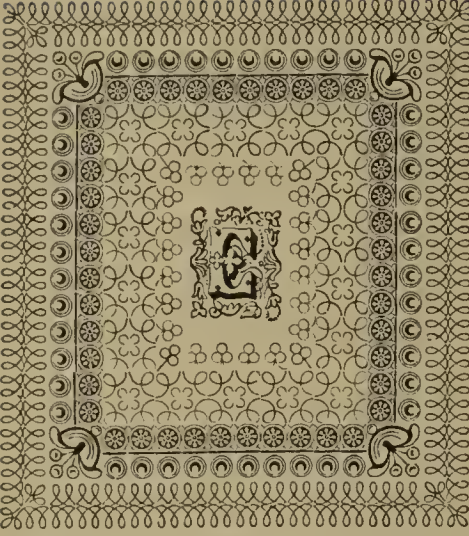
He was ultimately found dead in, or close by the Halgut, or Sealburn; at the foot of what was formerly called the Horse-close, a little to the west of Hexham church; and was buried under the old vestry room, by the side of a recumbent monument commonly shewn, perhaps erroneously, as that of the duke of Somerset, near the north door of the building. His burial is thus recorded, "1793, Oct. 13th, Robert Lowes, Attorney at Law."

When a Lawyer is seen rapidly accumulating wealth, especially if real property which had been the subject of litigation, fall into his hands; and the houses and fields of his clients, by a species of *leger de main* become his own possessions,—when like the monkey employed to divide a piece of cheese betwixt two cats, he never can bring the scales to an equipoise till he has made it all his own,—when estates are thus acquired without honest purchase or legitimate inheritance,—and he must walk blind-folded through the world who does not sometimes witness such things—the people of Hexham are accustomed to say of the Lawyer, be his name Ned or Charley—"He's another Bobby Lowes."



EDWARD COULSON,

OF HAYDON-BRIDGE.

CCENTRICITY of character independent of moral worth, seems by the common consent of mankind to entitle a person to a niche in the temple of Fame. Hence biography both ancient and modern, abounds in descriptions of *wonderful*, as well as *exemplary* men; many of whom whilst they have excited astonishment by their exploits, have afforded few traits worthy of imitation. To this class of character we may refer Ned Coulson, sometimes called the Haydon-bridge Greyhound.

Edward was the son of John and Susannah Coulson, and was born about April, 1754. His father was a joiner and wheelwright; he also mended clocks and watches. His mother was *une sage femme*. The old man himself seems to have had his eccentricities. On one occasion having been employed to make a coffin which did not please the party who gave the order—"Never mind," said John, "It's not fine enough for him, but it will do for me." He kept it the remainder of his life, and it served the purpose for which it was reserved. Both parents lived to a tolerably old age, and were buried at Haydon. The old woman's funeral was not managed to the satisfaction of her son: the spot where her husband had been buried, being covered with stones, she was not laid immediately beside him: this so displeased Edward, that he went no more to church, nor would he ever after pay those demands called *Church-dues*. His infancy is said to have been marked by an extreme slowness in learning to speak: he was five years old before he acquired that faculty, and had begun to feel annoyed by other children calling him *Dummy*, when at length he gave mouth in expressing his anger. When arrived at maturity he was about 5 feet 10 inches in height, of fairish complexion, very bony, and surprisingly strong: but his chief peculiarity was extreme swiftness. It may be noticed in this connexion, that Ned had a

brother called Bill, who was also an excellent runner, and is said to have lost his life by pursuing a beast which had broke loose, and in following which he swam across a river.

Coulson's general occupation was such as he had learnt from his father. He made racks, reels, and spinning wheels; and wrought well as a turner. Latterly he ran much about the country, cleaning clocks; he was also a glazier, and travelled much in the night, generally dragging a small cart after him; a vehicle which he found convenient for his purpose, and which was unique in its kind. In this he carried such materials and tools as his multifarious occupations required; and in which he not unfrequently managed to bring something useful home. His not driving but drawing his own carriage, made him a very peculiar object on the road. Though often seen thus performing what to others would appear drudgery, his dress was not quite such as to indicate the mere labourer: in this he affected to be rather genteel, though somewhat shabby: he wore ruffles, and carried a staff of a peculiar sort, a kind of thick twisted thorn; with which, in his nocturnal travels, had occasion required, he could have made himself very formidable. He has been charged with sometimes frightening travellers, by passing them, then hiding himself, and repassing them, all in silence; and at length bidding them good night, perhaps accompanied by a strange noise, which has been described as not unlike the report of a pistol, which he had a method of producing by an application of his finger to his mouth. His agility, thus at times mischievously employed, was an object of admiration wherever he was seen. He was a fiddler; not perhaps remarkable as an exquisite musician, but he could boast of an attainment which is much less common—he could perform whilst he ran along the road, and even with the instrument behind his back. He used various contortions of body whilst playing, as has often been witnessed in the streets of Hexham, where he has been seen standing at a public house door, with one leg suspended across the arm which held the fiddle, whilst he merrily scraped the cat-gut with a clean long pipe. At other times he has been observed running before a post-chaise as it passed through the main street from the west; fiddling all the way as he ran, and occasionally even with his face to the horses.*

Strength and agility seem to have been combined with courage, in the character of Coulson. The idle freak of getting into a lonely church

* Once in coming through Haughton Park, he was like to be attacked by a sticking bull, but Ned produced the fiddle which he generally carried with him—sounded the instrument, and the bull scampered off. The fiddler followed in quick style, and, it is said, ran the animal down. *R. W.*

at midnight, and ringing the bell, cannot however be taken as any satisfactory proof of his possessing that quality. His temerity was better tested by walking along the parapet of the bridge of his native town, with a load sometimes of two pecks of corn on his back, which he has frequently been seen to perform. He undertook a hazardous journey to Stanhope in Weardale, for Mrs. Tweddell of Threepwood, on some urgent occasion, one winter, during a remarkable storm which cut off every other means of communication. He succeeded in the enterprize, but the particulars cannot be here recited. Of the many pedestrian feats related of him, the correctness of the following has been well ascertained : having gone to Harlow-hill to clean a clock, he found after getting there that he had forgotten some of his work tools, which could neither be dispensed with, nor procured in the village. He went home to seek them, came back and finished his job, and returned the same night to Haydon-bridge ; thus walking not less than 65 miles, besides performing a piece of work. It is added that he reached home in time to take a successful part in the athletic sports on the village green. In feats of strength or swiftness, few surely could hope to compete with him, though men noted for skill in the gymnastic sciences would sometimes venture to challenge him ; and it ought to be set down to his credit, perhaps to his courage, and certainly to his wisdom, that he steadily refused to fight. Pugilism was not his forte, and he might have been worsted ; or a blow from his double-jointed fist might have seriously injured his antagonist.

Ned sometimes extended his journies beyond the border, visiting Jedburgh and other places in the south of Scotland. Whether he took his carriage the whole distance, or left it occasionally at places where he was known and could call for it on his return, does not appear ; but he is represented as coming in from his longest rambles dragging his cart after him ; and it was after having been some time from home on an excursion of this kind, that on his return he found the bridge of his native town had in part been taken away by a flood, so that his course was impeded, and he could not get over with his cart. Some workmen however managed to relieve him of the vehicle, whilst Ned made his way through the water, though deep. This is believed to have caused his death ; as he caught a cold which fixed upon his lungs, and from which he never recovered. Feeling his death approaching, and feeling too that he was a solitary bachelor, (for some men dispense with a wife till they have woeful need of a nurse) he desired to be removed to the house of a person of the same family name, most probably a relation, who lived up North Tyne. Here he soon died, not surviving his removal more than a few weeks. He appears to have been buried at Bellingham, Dec. 27th 1807, in his



BELLINGHAM CHURCH.

fifty fourth year. Sykes, who published an abridgement of this memoir in his Local Records, preferred giving a different date to this event. The writer can only say, that both this and some other biographical articles, which it has been found most eligible to insert in the traditional department of this work, have been composed with an anxious regard to historical correctness.

Poor Coulson ! in the absence of better qualities, it is but fair to give him credit for what has the appearance of a scriptural observance : and so far as purity of motive can be traced, he is entitled to credit for all his religious scruples. He is known to have had a particular aversion to swine ; and abhorred their flesh professedly in obedience to the Jewish law : for he had read his Bible, though he does not appear to have lived much under the influence of genuine Christianity. His residence was near that part of Haydon-bridge called the broad-stone, at the east end of the town, but which has since been rebuilt, perhaps without preserving any relic of NED COULSON.

It would have been easy to have enlarged this memoir, by relating other feats of prowess and of agility, equally extraordinary with those recited ; but the author has not found it so easy to ascertain in every instance the correctness of the statements.



Stanzas on Edward Coulson.

Renowned Runner—in an earlier age

Men used their limbs with an unfettered stride;
But now that coach and steam are all the rage,
Our puny bipeds only learn to ride.

O Mad Musician—who competes with thee,

Since Orpheus taught the savage herds that pleasure?
How had I left the fiddling crew, to see
Thee scrape the cat-gut to fantastic measure!

Thou wast no Striker—though of strength untold;

I place it to thy credit—Man of Might:
Let blustering champions vapour e'er so bold—
NED had the courage to refuse to fight.

